

Transformation of Gendered, Racial Capitalism in Lebanon: The Impact of the Post-2019 Lebanese Crisis on the *Kafala* System

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Abstract: *Following the post-2019 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut explosion, the Lebanese economy, including migration flows, has collapsed, and migrant domestic workers (MDWs) under the kafala system have been among those most impacted by these crises, with many losing their jobs, being voluntarily or involuntarily deported, or becoming homeless. This paper will argue that the 2019 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut explosion exacerbated the existing racialized and gendered marginalization of MDWs in Lebanon under the Kafala system, leading to increased unemployment, mass emigration and deportation, surging homelessness, and gender-based violence.*

Keywords: *Lebanon, Migrant Domestic Workers, Kafala System, 2019 Economic Crisis, Beirut Explosion, COVID-19, Racism, Sexism, Post-structuralism, Biopolitics*

Introduction

Lebanon has a long history of domestic labor. The original Lebanese domestic labor system was domestic slavery under the Ottoman Empire. Under this system, rural families from Mount Lebanon were used for voluntary household labor, and Palestinian, Egyptian, and Arab families were also used as domestic labor post-Lebanese independence.¹ From the Lebanese civil war on, there has been a system of majority Asian and African domestic labor, creating what is known as the modern *kafala* system.² The “*Kafala* system is a neoliberal approach to immigration... [in which] has been described as ‘essentially an employer-led, large-scale guest worker program that is open to admitting migrant workers, but at the same time restrictive in

¹ Sumayya Kassamali, “The *Kafala* System as Racialized Servitude,” *Racial Formations in Africa and the Middle East: A Transregional Approach* (2021): 102-103.

² *Ibid*, 102-103.

terms of the rights granted to migrants after admission.”³ Under the kafala system, the employer of a migrant worker, the *kafeel*, acts as a guarantor or sponsor and assumes full legal and economic responsibility for the worker they have hired for the full contract period.⁴ As of 2019, Lebanon hosted approximately 200,000-300,000 migrant domestic workers (MDWs), mostly coming from the Philippines, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India.⁵ This number is significantly less than the Gulf, where there are approximately 30 million migrants across all Gulf countries, far exceeding the number of citizens in many of these countries.⁶ Lebanon’s MDWs are 99% female, working predominantly as health/care workers, nurses, and cleaners, thus receiving gendered jobs such as cleaning and cooking and often working in the informal sector in dangerous roles.⁷

MDW treatment drastically declined post-2019. In 2019, a government announcement on a tax on WhatsApp, compounded with the poor public services and sectarian tensions resulted in mass demonstrations countrywide calling for full-scale political reform and the end of corruption. Soon after, in March 2020, the Lebanese government announced that it would default on a debt repayment for the first time in its history. Then the country locked down due to COVID-19, paralyzing the labor, education, and healthcare system. The national situation continued to deteriorate, and on August 4, 2020, a large amount of unsecured volatile ammonium nitrate exploded at a Beirut port warehouse, killing more than 200 people and injuring at least

³ Warisha Siddiqui, “Unavoidable aspects of Migrant labor: analysis of race, gender, and class in the Kafala system in contemporary Middle east,” *An Undergraduate Journal of International Affairs at Dartmouth College*: 3.

⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵ James Sater, “Migrant workers, labor rights, and governance in middle income countries: The case of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon,” in *Migration, Security, and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013), 120.

⁶ Brooke Sherman, “Changing the Tide for the Gulf’s Migrant Workers,” Viewpoint Series, Wilson Center, June 6, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/changing-tide-gulfs-migrant-workers>.

⁷ Jasmin Lilian Diab, “Gender and Migration in Times of COVID-19: Additional Risks on Migrant Women in the MENA and How to Address Them,” *Identities: Journal for politics, gender and culture* 17, no. 1 (2020): 162.

6,500. Inflation continued to grow throughout this period, so the price of food and basic needs skyrocketed while massive fuel shortages also disrupted electricity and transportation.⁸ These problems continue to compound to this day.

Following the post-2019 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut explosion, the Lebanese economy, including migration flows, has collapsed. Hundreds of MDWs have died, many continue to face violence, and the Lebanese pound has dropped to an all-time low, devaluing to 41,650 liras against the US dollar in December 2022 (compared to 1507.5 liras to the dollar from 1997 to 2019).⁹ Migrant workers have been among those most impacted by these crises, with many losing their jobs, being voluntarily or involuntarily deported, or becoming homeless.¹⁰ Consequently, Lebanon now reports 170,000 migrants have left Lebanon altogether, and remittances from Lebanon to migrant countries have drastically decreased.¹¹

The 2019 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut explosion exacerbated the existing racialized and gendered marginalization of MDWs in Lebanon under the Kafala system, leading to increased unemployment, mass emigration and deportation, surging homelessness, and gender-based violence. This phenomenon will be examined through a post-structural lens. Post-structuralism will be defined as a study of the diffuse distribution of power or a “multiplicity of force relations” that exist through individuals, discourses, and structures popularized by Michel Foucault.¹² To explore the power relations impacting MDWs, I will initially discuss the background of economic exploitation of the *kafala* system from the end of

⁸ “Lebanon: Timeline of a Country in Crisis,” The Lebanese Society for Educational & Social Development, LSESD, August 29, 2022, <https://www.lsesd.org/lebanon-timeline-of-a-country-in-crisis/>.

⁹ Kareem Chehayeb, “Value of Lebanese pound drops to all-time low,” Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, May 26, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/26/lebanese-pound-value-drops-to-lowest-level>.

¹⁰ Rana Aoun, “COVID-19 Impact on Female Migrant Domestic Workers in the Middle East,” *GBV AoR Helpdesk* 5 (2020): 3.

¹¹ Bibikova Olga, “On Systemic Racism In the Lebanon Society,” *Russia and the moslem world* 2, no. 316 (2022): 88.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 92.

the Lebanese Civil War to 2019 and how this economic exploitation discriminated against MDWs along gender and racial/ ethnic lines. Then, I will analyze how the crises post-2019 mentioned above impacted domestic workers within Lebanon and the systems of power in which they were entrenched, resulting in their emigration from Lebanon. Due to a lack of primary sources by MDWs, this article will predominantly draw on secondary-source sources such as academic literature, reports from humanitarian organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International, and UN Women, and news analysis from October 2019- present, looking specifically at the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Al Jazeera*.

Background: Lebanese Kafala System 1990-2019

The 1990-2019 era of the Lebanese kafala system demonstrates how the kafeels as individuals, and the Lebanese government and legislation, worked together to allow the severe abuse of MDWs on racial and gender grounds even before the 2019 crisis. To provide some background, most MDWs in Lebanon come from Ethiopia, followed by Bangladesh, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, as well as additional African countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Madagascar, Senegal, and Togo, although there are not exact numbers on each.¹³ The kafala system was so widespread before 2019 that it was estimated that one in four Lebanese families employed a full time, live-in migrant domestic worker prior to 2019.¹⁴

Despite their prevalence in Lebanese families, kafeels exhibited widespread abuse and mistreatment towards MDWs prior to 2019. For example, MDWs were often prevented from

¹³ Janine Gunzelmann, "Intersecting Oppressions of Migrant Domestic Workers: (In)Securities of Female Migration to Lebanon," Master's thesis, (Linnaeus University, 2020), 9.

¹⁴ Sumayya Kassamali, "Understanding Race and Migrant Domestic Labor in Lebanon," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 299 (2021), <https://merip.org/2021/07/understanding-race-and-migrant-domestic-labor-in-lebanon/>.

calling their families, prevented access to adequate food and accommodation, and expected to be on-call 24/7.¹⁵ Many MDWs furthermore faced several types of abuse, as seen in Figure 1:¹⁶

Figure 1: Statistics on MDW Treatment by Employers/ Kafels; Source: Kassamali.

% of employers that give MDWs their legally entitled day off	<50%
% of employers who give their MDWs their legally entitled day off and % who let them leave the house alone	50%
% of employers who lock MDWs inside the house regularly	20%
% of employers who confiscate MDWs' passports upon arrival	93%
% of employers who refuse to pay MDW salaries in full at the end of the month	40%
Average hours of work of MDWs per day	15
% of employers reported to beat their MDWs	33%
% of MDWs threatened by their employers ¹⁷	46%

These statistics demonstrate that MDWs faced significant curtailment of their mobility, danger to their bodies, and were forced to overwork without sufficient compensation even before 2019. HRW also exposed the extent of MDW working conditions when revealing reports from 2017 from Lebanon’s intelligence agency, estimating that two migrant workers on average died each week in Lebanon from suicide or cases suspected to be suicide that year.¹⁸ Thus, MDWs were already treated as disposable with roles encompassing all work in the household without

¹⁵ Bina Fernandez, "Racialised institutional humiliation through the Kafala," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47, no. 19 (2021): 43453.

¹⁶ Kassamali, "The Kafala System as Racialized Servitude," 105.

¹⁷ Macy Janine R Pamaranglas, "The Kafala System: A Replica of Lebanon’s Violent Sectarian System?" Senior Study, (Lebanese American University, 2021), 22.

¹⁸ Aine Healy, "Structuring the Patriarchy through Borders," *Trinity Middle East and North Africa Review*, Trinity Middle East and North Africa Review, July 7, 2022, <https://tcdmenareview.com/structuring-the-patriarchy-through-borders/>.

appropriate or often any compensation. Therefore, the interpersonal relations between *kafeel* and MDWs showed an imbalance of power leading to hegemonic treatment by *kafeels* and subordination of MDWs.

MDWs also did not have the legal power to punish their employers for these abuses because the legal system as an institution works against the human rights of MDWs. As a result of abuses, HRW reports that although 114 criminal cases were brought by MDWs to the Ministry of Labor in 2010, none of them were brought to trial.¹⁹ The lack of litigation to protect MDWs is because there is no specific legislation that regulates domestic workers in Lebanon besides the Standard Unified Contract.²⁰ According to article 14 of the Contract, the worker can terminate the contract if the employer fails to pay wages for three consecutive months, if the worker has to work in another capacity without her or his consent, or if the worker is being assaulted, abused, harassed, or sexually assaulted by one of the occupants of the houses.²¹ However, workers must provide proof in such cases of abuse, which is often difficult, if not impossible, so the 114 cases did not have sufficient proof and could not be brought to trial.²² Furthermore, if MDWs protest their terms of employment, the *kafeel* can unilaterally lower their wages, abuse them, refuse to renew their contract, or petition for their deportation, which results in a loss of their legal residency and possible criminal charges.²³ However, for MDWs who do leave their employers and become what are called “freelancers,” they often have no way of traveling back to their

¹⁹ Lara Ramon Icart, “The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8 in Lebanon: Women migrant domestic workers sustaining Lebanese lives while resisting the *kafala* system,” thesis, (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2021), 18.

²⁰ Dimitra Dermizaki and Sylvia Riewendt, “The *Kafāla* system: Gender and migration in contemporary Lebanon,” *Middle East-Topics & Arguments* 14 (2020): 109.

²¹ *Ibid*, 110.

²² *Ibid*, 110.

²³ Marya Al-Hindi, “A Comparative Analysis of the Femicide of Migrant Domestic Workers in Bahrain and Lebanon,” *Contemporary Challenges: The Global Crime, Justice and Security Journal* 1 (2020): 59-75.

home countries because they do not have legal status.²⁴ Therefore, leaving an abusive *kafeel* or challenging their mistreatment could result in further abuse, termination, or loss of legal status for MDWs. Further research on the diffusion of *kafeel* domination and MDW subordination indicates that gender and race were also used as justifications for mistreatment.

A Gender Lens to Lebanon's Kafala System Pre-2019

By taking a post-structural approach, it appears that in the pre-2019 period, MDW exploitation already occurred because sexist stereotypes of women inform their roles and treatment. As mentioned above, women before 2019 made up 99% of MDWs in Lebanon, much higher than the rate of women in other *kafala* systems, and they worked predominantly in informal sectors, where there were fewer protections compared to the formal sector.²⁵

Gunzelmann in her interviews found that the high proportion of female domestic workers in Lebanon is due to lower costs associated with female labor in Lebanon.²⁶ Prior to 2019 (as well as after), Lebanese *kafeels* paid less for women because the combination of racial and gender discrimination resulted in the devaluing of female/domestic work, and the specific stereotypes implied within that devaluation will be articulated below.

As often seen in feminist analyses, Lebanese women, while possible allies to MDWs, were often the individuals who most perpetuated sexism toward MDWs before the economic crisis through “female misogyny, i.e., hatred and rejection of women by other women (madams).”²⁷ Hence, gender did not create the basis for solidarity between Lebanese women and their MDWs, but instead, Lebanese women used the differing employment status to enrich

²⁴ Janine Gunzelmann, “Intersecting Oppressions of Migrant Domestic Workers: (In)Securities of Female Migration to Lebanon,” Master’s thesis, (Linnaeus University, 2020), 40.

²⁵ Diab, “Gender and Migration in Times of COVID-19,” 162.

²⁶ Gunzelmann, “Intersecting Oppressions of Migrant Domestic Workers,” 31.

²⁷ Dimitra Dermitzaki and Sylvia Riewendt, “The Kafāla system: Gender and migration,” 112.

themselves and further subordinate their employees. It is also intriguing to note that out of the 1,200 kafeels examined by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 2016, most were married middle-aged women in the intermediate and lower middle class of the Lebanese working population; in contrast, upper-class Lebanese people would pay for non-migrant labor.²⁸ Therefore, MDWs' legal statuses were largely dependent on other women, and Lebanese women did not need to be upper-class to be able to hire MDWs. Another level of domination can be seen as lower-/middle-class Lebanese women marginalized individuals who are lower-/middle-class in their societies, so there was no class or gender solidarity. Aine Healy portrays how male employers and other men in the household further degraded MDWs because MDWs were expected to show affection and maternal love for the children they cared for and frequently show emotional support to their employer, a dynamic that often resulted in sexual abuse.²⁹ The idea of affection for home and family members was often manipulated to coerce illicit emotional and sexual labor. Therefore, kafeels manipulated a fundamental tenet of post-structuralism, biopolitics, also known as the exercise of power over populations through managing and regulating their biological and social lives, to abuse MDWs,³⁰ and Lebanese women in the household were complicit in this physical and sexual violence.

Unfortunately, biopolitical discrimination against MDWs without legal consequences extended beyond the household pre-2019. The Lebanese system of citizenship provides that Lebanese women cannot pass down their citizenship, but also migrant women cannot get Lebanese citizenship regardless of how many years they have lived in the country, unless they

²⁸ Rasha Shalha, "Class Interest and the Kafala System in Lebanon," Master's thesis, (Lebanese American University, 2020), 28.

²⁹ Healy.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 141.

marry a Lebanese man.³¹ The lack of stable citizenship situation for MDWs and their children made pregnancy and long-term residency extremely unstable as many MDWs feared deportation unless they stayed with the same kafeels for years, which comes with its dangers. MDWs also experienced sexism directly in public. For example, MDWs regularly faced sexual harassment from taxi drivers, shop owners, and other men when navigating the country.³² To escape some of the harassment and seek some intimacy, some MDWs entered relationships with Lebanese men or other non-nationals, which could sometimes help with mobility around Lebanon. However, often MDW relationships with men lead to further misogyny as well as abuse because male partners felt the female MDWs were beholden to them for the male privileges they offered, such as safety in society and/or possible citizenship.³³ Thus, men exploited MDWs more explicitly than Lebanese women because of racism and because of the national, gender, and employment power dynamics that force MDWs to hook up to survive.³⁴ Spaces outside the home could also be just as dangerous for MDWs and could result in MDWs looking to those who hold gendered power (or citizenship) to maneuver society more safely, resulting in other forms of gendered exploitation. For many MDWs, there were few safe spaces in Lebanon to escape from the biopolitics of gendered harassment. MDWs also faced specifically racialized exploitation that may have intensified gender hierarchies.

A Racial Lens to Lebanon's Kafala System Pre-2019

Racism has also been used as a primary justification for MDW mistreatment transhistorically in Lebanon. During the 1950s and 1960s, large numbers of Asian and African students studied at universities in Lebanon as the hub of anticolonial intellectual and political

³¹ Pamaranglas, "The Kafala System: A Replica," 25.

³² Fernandez, "Racialised institutional humiliation," 4354.

³³ Gunzelmann, "Intersecting Oppressions of Migrant Domestic Workers," 42-43.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

imagination.³⁵ However, after the 1990s, when South Asian and African workers became the predominant domestic workers in Lebanon, domestic work's racialization led to the lowering of the social status of domestic workers and the subsequent decrease in their salaries.³⁶ Thus, after the Lebanese Civil War, domestic work became shameful for Arabs, so Black and Brown people's labor filled this gap. Because of the increasingly negative connotations of their nationalities and skin color, domestic workers received less money and social status. The kafala system further positioned Lebanese citizens closer to "whiteness" as social power and MDWs closer to "Blackness," on top of further entrenching the hierarchies associated with the ability to speak Arabic and nationality.³⁷ Although the kafala system did not physically change kafeels' or MDWs' races, it did create systemic power disparities along these lines.

This history also created a racialized hierarchy of wages and working conditions throughout Lebanon. Across global kafala systems, MDWs' wages were ranked by race and nationality with Filipina women commanding the highest wages, followed by Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Nepali, and finally Ethiopian and other African women.³⁸ The hierarchy of wages and conditions was because Filipinas (and Indonesians) were believed to be cleaner, more educated, and capable of speaking English, so Filipina and Indonesian women often received around \$300 per month.³⁹ In contrast, Ethiopians, Sri Lankans, and Bangladeshis, who were believed to be less educated and have little to no experience with household appliances, had salaries of around \$200 per month.⁴⁰ Ethiopian women were also more likely to be given more

³⁵ Sumayya Kassamali, "Understanding Race and Migrant Domestic Labor in Lebanon," *Middle East Research and Information Project* 299 (2021), <https://merip.org/2021/07/understanding-race-and-migrant-domestic-labor-in-lebanon/>.

³⁶ Icart, "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8 in Lebanon," 15.

³⁷ Kassamali, "Understanding Race and Migrant Domestic Labor in Lebanon."

³⁸ Fernandez, "Racialised institutional humiliation," 4353-4354.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 4353-4354.

⁴⁰ Aina Puig-Ferriol Cabruja, "The *Kafala* System: the case of Lebanon and ways forward," Master's thesis, (Universitat de Barcelona, 2021), 29-30.

physically taxing work in the household while Filipina and Indonesian women might be given childcare-related work.⁴¹ On the basis of the same racist stereotypes, recruitment agencies in Lebanon would also pay 1,000-1,500 USD for a Sri Lankan worker compared to 2,000-3,000 USD for a Filipina worker.⁴² To some degree this is true as Filipina workers are the most educated (i.e. being able to read their contracts); however, the stereotypes about Ethiopians', Sri Lankans', and Bangladeshis' cleanliness and experience with appliances are unfounded.⁴³ Thus, racial stereotypes heavily dictated the beliefs about different ethnicities/ nationalities and their personalities/abilities, and as a result, puts a number on their financial worth.

Biopolitical treatment also manifests as everyday racism towards MDWs in the household. For example, Ethiopian and other African women were often called *asuad* (black), or *kafeels* referred to them and their country as “poor” and uncivilized. However, simultaneously, in other forms of treatment, these groups were universalized and essentialized. For example, MDWs would be referred to according to their countries instead of their first names, such as *srilankiyye*, which means Sri Lankan, but this misnaming was used to mean maid with gendered, racialized, and classed connotations.⁴⁴ Calling MDWs by these slurs and universalizing them shows that MDWs are not valued as individuals; instead, they are seen as one unit within a monolithic workforce slightly broken down into racial hierarchies. Some MDWs even recounted in interviews to Icart that their employers would call them dirty and stinky and consequently would refuse to share physical contact with their MDWs, use the same dishes, share a pool with them, or eat with them, which would create a situation of physical and social segregation

⁴¹ Fernandez, “Racialised institutional humiliation,” 4354.

⁴² Shalha, “Class Interest and the Kafala System,” 8, 21.

⁴³ “Lebanon-Domestic Policy,” Atlas of Enslavement, Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, accessed December 1, 2022, <https://atlasofenslavement.rosalux-geneva.org/lebanon/>.

⁴⁴ Sumayya Kassamali, “The *Kafala* System as Racialized Servitude,” 102.

between MDWs and kafeels. Similarly, MDWs were often forced to walk behind their employers in public, only eat their leftovers, and they were often not allowed to cook their traditional food because it was seen as low status.⁴⁵ Hence, Lebanese people often treated their workers like livestock that needs to be kept physically segregated from them and as if their stereotypes, no matter how grounded in imagination, are contagious. As briefly tackled before, MDWs' race was inherently connected to their class. Lebanese employers and civilians would also bully MDWs because of their poverty, taunting them that they are not clever enough for social mobility and that they were born and programmed to do domestic work due to their gender and race, so they should not be tired or complain about it.⁴⁶ Thus, the identity of an MDW (and the stereotypes associated with that identity) was weaponized against their work and intended to prevent them from resisting.

Although the Lebanese state as an institution exemplifies the disenfranchisement of MDWs and further prevents resistance, migrant workers did find ways to organize for their labor rights prior to 2019. Nevertheless, post-structural power's difficulty is that its diffusiveness makes it difficult to challenge and exterminate. From an organizational lens, the Lebanese government prohibits migrant workers from organizing trade unions and deprives them of political rights. Additional examples include even deporting workers periodically to control the supply of cheap labor and banning the ILO-organized Action Programme for Protecting the Rights of Women Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon/ Domestic Workers Union before 2019.⁴⁷ Internal trade union practices were often not better because they were predominantly pan-Arab in orientation and resisted extending rights to MDWs based on the aforementioned

⁴⁵ Icart, "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8 in Lebanon," 8-9.

⁴⁶ Gunzelmann, "Intersecting Oppressions of Migrant Domestic Workers," 36.

⁴⁷ Icart, "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8 in Lebanon," 17.

racist and gender stereotypes.⁴⁸ Because unions were unable and unwilling to support MDWs, and the Lebanese state was an active participant in MDW oppression, the Lebanese Anti-Racist Movement, KAFA Violence and Exploitation, INSAN Association, This is Lebanon, and Caritas have provided food and health resources for MDWs when the state and their kafeels fail to do so.⁴⁹ Even traditional forms of class/ labor solidarity have barriers or biases against supporting MDW rights. However, internal MDW organizations continue to work to resist the state.

This background indicates that Lebanese individuals and institutions implicitly collaborated to subjugate MDWs in the labor system based on gendered and racialized attitudes and stereotypes without legal recourse for abuse, even prior to 2019. Unfortunately, these conditions continued to deteriorate post-2019. The following section will fill gaps by providing news and articles emphasizing how the gendered and racialized subjugation of MDWs deepened under the economic crisis, COVID-19, and the August 4th explosion.

Changes to the Kafala System in Lebanon Post-2019

Although there were many features of the kafala system mentioned above that continued post-2019, the economic collapse, COVID-19, and the August 4th explosion deepened the biopolitical sexist and racist violence towards the MDW community, causing increased unemployment, mass emigration and deportation, surging homelessness, and gender-based violence. Across the Middle East, countries with kafala systems suffered from a 20% drop in remittances to low- and middle-income countries from 2019's \$714 billion to \$572 billion in 2020, exceeding the 5% dip of the 2008 crisis.⁵⁰ Due to the currency devaluation, Lebanon far

⁴⁸ Sater, "Migrant workers, labor rights, and governance in middle income countries," 126.

⁴⁹ Icart, "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8 in Lebanon," 19.

⁵⁰ Omer Karasapan, "Pandemic highlights the vulnerability of migrant workers in the Middle East," Brookings Institution, Brookings Institution, September 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/09/17/pandemic-highlights-the-vulnerability-of-migrant-workers-in-the-middle-east/>.

exceeded the 20% drop, with reports approximating a 50% decrease in remittances, especially due to the payment of MDWs in Lebanese lira instead of USD.⁵¹ According to the World Bank, this economic crisis is one of the top ten worst, even possibly the top three worst, economic crises worldwide since the mid-nineteenth century.⁵² This section will examine the severity of the post-2019 period through an analysis of how gender and racial power relations impacted MDWs, first discussing power relations in the economic crisis, then during the COVID-19 pandemic, and lastly, following the Beirut explosion.

First, individual kafeels have exerted their power during the economic crisis by cutting costs attributed to MDWs, and this caused an increase in severe poverty for MDWs, resulting in their displacement and emigration. While before, some MDWs were being paid a portion of their salary, during the crisis, most MDWs were not being paid at all, and their savings were stolen by their employers because their employers could not afford to pay them the total amount.⁵³ The lack of salaries is compounded by how the prices of food and basic hygiene products are rising rapidly, so many migrant workers cannot afford to buy them.⁵⁴ Thus, it is near-impossible to send money home on top of buying necessities. While MDWs in Lebanon have historically chosen to survive the terrible working conditions mentioned above to support their families back in their home countries, the combined economic decline of the events mentioned above has resulted in a severe decline in remittances. Due to the sharp deterioration of the economic situation and inability to send remittances, about 170,000 immigrant women workers have left

⁵¹ "Lebanon- Domestic Policy."

⁵² "Lebanon Sinking into One of the Most Severe Global Crises Episodes, amidst Deliberate Inaction," World Bank, World Bank, June 1, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/01/lebanon-sinking-into-one-of-the-most-severe-global-crises-episodes>.

⁵³ Icart, "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8 in Lebanon," 24.

⁵⁴ Zeina Mezher, "Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Lebanon and what employers can do about it," *International Labour Organization* (2020): 1.

Lebanon in the last two years.⁵⁵ By December 2019, 1,000 Filipino migrant workers also registered for their free repatriation program.⁵⁶ As Amnesty reports, hundreds of Ethiopian MDWs in 2020 were also dropped off by their employers to the streets without any aid. Hence, they gathered at the side of the Ethiopian Consulate for a couple of months to attempt to get urgent assistance concerning repatriation, as many of their kafeels had not given them their wages or passports. During the summer of 2020, the new Ethiopian consul allowed displaced women to reside temporarily in the Embassy's shelter, but it is uncertain what happened to these Ethiopian MDWs after this period.⁵⁷ There has never been a mass displacement of MDWs like this in the history of Lebanon. For MDWs who are unable to leave, many are choosing to end their lives, causing the suicide rate to climb since October 2019, although exact data remains limited.⁵⁸ Thus, the implication of combining the institutional decline of the Lebanese economy and individual kafeels' decisions with MDWs' gender and racial status is that MDWs cannot earn enough wages to survive or send remittances, so they are often forced to emigrate.

COVID-19 as a pandemic and the government and kafeels' response to it dramatically increased the economic and health biopolitical exploitation of MDWs in Lebanon, with many justifications drawing from racial bases. An international assessment of MDWs in Lebanon found that nearly 80 percent of kafeels stopped paying their MDWs during the financial/economic crisis of 2019, and one-third of those losses were reported during the

⁵⁵ Olga, "On Systemic Racism In the Lebanon Society," 88.

⁵⁶ Aya Majzoub, "Life for Lebanon's migrant domestic workers worsens amid crisis: From bad to worse," Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Watch, March 6, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/life-lebanons-migrant-domestic-workers-worsens-amid-crisis#:~:text=Hardly%20anyone%20in%20Lebanon%20has,marginalized%20prior%20to%20the%20crisis.>

⁵⁷ Parisa Nasrabadi, "Removing the Cloak of Invisibility: The Case of Ethiopian Female Domestic Workers in Lebanon," *Unknown* (2020): 4.

⁵⁸ Puig-Ferriol, "The *Kafala* System: the case of Lebanon," 7.

COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁹ The high rate of salary decline during the COVID-19 pandemic is substantial given that the economic crisis was severe prior to the pandemic and has continued to deteriorate after the pandemic climax. MDWs were also asked to leave their households, especially if MDWs got COVID-19, forcing them into homelessness or living in other overcrowded situations.⁶⁰ For example, one case was reported where 41 MDWs and their families were living in an apartment together in Beirut during the lockdown.⁶¹ Some were also forced to leave because panic and fear of the COVID-19 virus also increased xenophobia with many referring once again to the racist stereotypes that MDWs are dirtier, believing they would be more likely to catch the virus.⁶² Thus, MDWs were kicked out of their homes because kafeels believed they were more likely to transmit the virus. For the MDWs that did not have their contract terminated, the risk of contracting COVID-19 was exceptionally high because many MDWs oversee cleaning, caregiving for children and the elderly, and taking care of family members with COVID-19 or going outside to perform tasks.⁶³ Kafeels view MDW lives as less important to preserve from COVID, especially given that their jobs already revolved around caretaking. Thus, MDWs were forced to risk their lives daily to protect their employers from COVID-19, solidifying images that MDWs' worth is inferior to Lebanese citizens' worth because of their race or ethnicity and that they have less power over where they can live even in a pandemic.

With many MDWs already struggling with lack of privacy, workers were also often unable to leave their kafeels' homes, so many MDWs have experienced additional gender-based

⁵⁹ Samantha M. Constant et al., "The Status of Women in Lebanon: Assessing Women's Access to Economic Opportunities, Human Capital Accumulation, and Agency," *World Bank and UN Women* (2022): 40.

⁶⁰ Aoun, "COVID-19 Impact on Female Migrant Domestic Workers," 3.

⁶¹ Icart, "The UN's Sustainable Development Goals 5 and 8 in Lebanon," 21.

⁶² Mezher, "Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Lebanon," 1.

⁶³ Ghaddar et al., Ghaddar, Ali, Sanaa Khandaqji, and Jinane Ghattas. "Justifying abuse of women migrant domestic workers in Lebanon: the opinion of recruitment agencies." *Gaceta sanitaria* 34 (2021): 6.

violence (GBV) or have had to isolate themselves with their abusers, putting them in dire mental and physical situations.⁶⁴ For example, the Gender-Based Violent Information Management System recorded a 3 percent increase of intimate partner violence by current or former partners, a 5 percent increase of physical assault incidents, and a 9 percent increase of incidents occurring in a survivor's home.⁶⁵ In total, in 2022, two-thirds of female MDWs in Lebanon reported being survivors of some form of sexual harassment or sexual assault, with most assaults being from their employers.⁶⁶ The Law 293 in Lebanon criminalizing GBV also does not cover MDWs at all.⁶⁷ Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened biopolitical violence against MDWs because it increased the incidence of GBV due to the lack of privacy of MDWs and the authority of kafeels without institutional support for MDWs in cases of abuse.

On top of not protecting MDWs against GBV, the Lebanese government has actively imposed biopolitical damage on MDWs by contributing to the abysmal health outcomes of MDWs during COVID-19. The Lebanese government could not maintain the lockdown throughout the pandemic because of the fear that poverty and famine would continue to get worse.⁶⁸ In 2020, the Lebanese government enacted new laws restricting the ability of MDWs to get tested, so MDWs were denied access to PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests, vaccines, and hospitals despite displaying symptoms of COVID-19, resulting in many deaths of MDWs from COVID-19 who did not have access to healthcare even though this right was guaranteed in the Standard Unified Contract.⁶⁹ The implicit logic of the Lebanese government, as well as the

⁶⁴ Aoun, "COVID-19 Impact on Female Migrant Domestic Workers," 3.

⁶⁵ Constant et al., "The Status of Women in Lebanon," 12.

⁶⁶ Etenesh Abera and Zecharias Zelalem, "'Two thirds' of female migrant workers in Lebanon survivors of sexual harassment," Middle East Eye, Middle East Eye, October 17, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanon-two-thirds-migrant-worker-women-survivors-sexual-harassment>.

⁶⁷ Constant et al., "The Status of Women in Lebanon," 68.

⁶⁸ Puig-Ferriol, "The *Kafala* System: the case of Lebanon," 32.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 33.

kafeels who consolidated the health degradation of MDWs, is that the lives of MDWs mattered less than that of the Lebanese. Due to their race, work status, and nationality, it was presumed that MDWs did not deserve the medical resources to survive the pandemic.

The August 4th explosion exemplified that despite its status and responsibilities as a national government, the Lebanese state failed its citizens and MDWs through their neglect, further exacerbating the economic and human rights situations of MDWs. See Figure 2 below for the International Organization for Migration's rates of the total impact of the Beirut explosion on MDWs.

	Total Impact of the Beirut explosion	MDW Impact
# of Deaths	>200	15
# of Injured	>6,500	150
# of Homeless	>300,000	>24,000

Figure 2: Total Impact of the Beirut Explosion and Impact on MDWs; Source: Puig-Ferriol, "The Kafala System: the case of Lebanon," 32.

Therefore, many of the deaths, injured, and homeless were MDWs. On top of these rates, many MDWs have been laid off by families hit by the explosion and/or been placed in safe houses without any furniture, access to food, drinking water, and communication facilities.⁷⁰

Throughout the explosion, both individual kafeels and institutions have wholly neglected MDWs to the point of their destitution. There were no government-led responses to help MDWs after the explosion. To make matters worse, after the explosion in the port of Beirut, Lebanese employers started hiring more Syrian women as domestic servants because their wages are lower than previous MDWs, they do not require housing, and there is no need to pay for a visa or work

⁷⁰ Nasrabadi, "Removing the Cloak of Invisibility," 4.

permit, etc.⁷¹ Hence, it is intriguing and heart-breaking that the government devalued MDWs once they found a possible cheaper labor force, returning to an Arab source of labor as they had in the decades before without helping MDWs. The impacts of the explosion continue to be experienced today. Around the second anniversary of the explosion, the Northern section of the grain silos damaged in the blast collapsed and brought down eight more siloes.⁷² Currently, there is no research or reports on additional damage, injuries, or murders from this event, and notably, there is a total lack of research on the impact on MDWs.

Thus, the combined impact of the Lebanese economic crisis, COVID-19, and the Beirut explosion have demonstrated the total subjugation of MDWs in Lebanon, as seen through their deaths, injuries, homelessness, or exposure to increasing GBV. Moreover, because MDW workers receive second-class treatment due to their lack of citizenship, ethnicity, and race, and they could be disposed of for cheaper labor with Syrian refugees, they received little to no protection from the brunt of the economic and physical atrocities facing the country and were actively put in harm's way.

Conclusion

This article has indicated that the power relations impacting MDWs in Lebanon prior to 2019 were already highly exploitative and often exacerbated by gendered and racial stereotypes on an individual and institutional level. However, after the economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the August 4th explosion, the biopolitical discrimination affecting MDWs worsened significantly, and the same basis of sexism and racism has been used to disregard their human rights and health needs to the point of their severe poverty. Thus, the strengthening of the

⁷¹ Olga, "On Systemic Racism In the Lebanon Society," 87.

⁷² "New Beirut port silo collapse brings back blast trauma," Al Jazeera, Al Jazeera, August 23, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/23/new-silo-collapse-in-blast-ravaged-beirut-port>.

gendered and racial hierarchy post-2019 and MDWs' consequent economic exploitation have resulted in many MDWs returning to their home countries as the economic decline on top of gendered and racial biopolitical violence has made it not worth it to stay in Lebanon.

Further research on this topic should more thoroughly examine the political economy of MDW freelancers, compare Lebanon and Jordan as smaller-scale kafala systems, and gather more comprehensive quantitative data, such as on the exact rates of remittance decline in Lebanon.